UNIFICATION THEORY

An exclusive short story incorporating elements from The Vampire Curse and Of the City of the Saved..., and setting up background for 'A Hundred Words from a Civil War'. Warning: this story contains SPOILERS for Predating the Predators and Of the City of the Saved....

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Krisztina-Judit Németh, View Point

Spider-masked and ever-hungry, Krisztina-Judit Németh of the Sons of Tepes crime cartel looks out across the balustrades over the all-but-infinite demesne they call the City of the Saved.

From here – the summit of a tower constructed (assuming that it was ever constructed) to the same unfathomable height at which the sun once hovered above the Earth – only the very largest landscape features can be seen. The artificial suns of distant Parks, star-twinkling. The ripple of the River Okeanos, light-decades long, broad as a gas-giant's orbit. The Lemuel Mountains – tall as piled-up planets but from such a height mere wrinkles – where the very biggest of posthuman giants dwell.

The rest is bleached-white sky-dome or jade City-floor.

None of which interests Krisztina-Judit, although the blue sun floating above the far-off Desert Park of Tashistan gives her a moment's pause. Her attention is on her fellow party-goers, other guests at Cllr St Marx's masked ball – all here in theory, like Krisztina-Judit herself, to fête the Councillor's Houseworld visitor Prof Handramit. Krisztina-Judit has already greeted him, clasping his hand politely at the welcoming arch, politely suppressing the savage, murderous enmity her kind instinctively feels towards his. The niceties must be observed.

Most of the assembled company are academics, as Handramit and St Marx are, and as Krisztina-Judit once was herself – back when she ate and breathed and grew steadily older, and sometimes called herself Kayjay. Most of them are also, as she was then, alive; although in this techno-eschatic Heaven, their bodies are not always what they were.

Some people who died old were reborn young, back on Resurrection Day. Some amputees were resurrected whole. Tattoos, scarification, cosmetic regenement, body-piercing – some of these persisted into resurrection bodies, while others vanished like lost talismans.

Some Citizens still bear the scars of the smallpox or syphilis that killed them. And others who, like Krisztina-Judit Németh, were subject in life to more exotic infections, bear their own stigmata.

Dr K.-J. Németh had been, at various times, a student, toddler, lecturer, lover, hopeless netball player, occasional rock-climber, competent cryptoepidemiologist, indifferent cook, evangelistic fan of a boy band named 'Voy"Sez"', and, on one panicked occasion, a samaritan who heimliched a choking colleague back from the brink of asphyxia.

Now she is one thing alone. Krisztina-Judit Németh, predator.

To be a vampire in the City of the Saved, one invulnerable Citizen among countless invulnerable decillions, is to lack dignity, function, identity and even sustenance.

She cannot starve, any more than her fellow-guests' throats can be pierced by her yearning teeth, but she can hunger.

And she does. Always.

She sees him first while part of a small knot of guests at whom Prof Vril is pontificating. He is standing at the parapet, using one of St Marx's novelty handheld pseudo-telescopes to stare due North. She ignores him at first, distracted by Vril's mild harangue.

'Richard has it all wrong,' the diminutive academic explains patiently. 'As I was telling his charming wife just now, it's hardly the first time. I sometimes think that if he met a lunatic claiming to be Napoleon, he'd say it proved there'd never been a real one.'

Vril is masked as an ancient pop-culture alien, a Grey: tiny crescent mouth (in which he now crams a large Fidelio District cigar), vestigial nostrils, black all-seeing stare. Krisztina-Judit imagines his huge Neotonic face behind it,just as large-eyed and high-domed, though very much more animated.

The Neotonic Clade was one of many posthuman types created along eugenic principles during the eleventh billennium: humanity perfected and idealised, freed of base impulses like lust, addiction, greed, anger, malice. They lived a life of intellectual and spiritual contemplation in an isolated utopia, abstaining from intoxicants, performing yoga thrice daily, disdaining pleasure in food or sex or any other necessary function.

'It's all a sliding scale,' Vril enthuses, removing the cigar. 'When physicians learned how to delay death, that didn't mean there was no Heaven. Of course a few fanatics claimed that medicine was keeping the dying from God, and denounced the doctors as operatives of Satan. But most religious thinkers just assimilated it.'

In Vril's case, this genetically-determined asceticism lasted less than a week after his resurrection in the City. He swigs his expensive brandy and brandishes the Fidelian cigar like a tiny Groucho. 'It goes on from there,' he says. 'Doctors learned to resuscitate. Did that disprove Heaven? The consensus said no.'

He belches, covering his mouth with a long-fingered, spiderish hand. 'Excuse me. So – humanity developed cryogenics, longevity treatments, backup clones, sentient uploads. There were still religions, many and varied ones, believing in a spiritual afterlife beyond all these. Now here we are – resurrected, we assume by technological means, with not a God in sight. This clearly isn't Heaven, but does that mean there isn't one? Why do we assume that this is our ultimate destination, rather than a waystation along the way? Ooh, are those vol-au-vents the cheesy ones? I'll just stock up.'

Rescued by the waitress, Krisztina-Judit slips away. Behind her Mother Vittoria Cellini, envoy from one of the more jihad-prone 90th-century Popes, shrilly takes issue with Vril's woolly pluralism.

It's then Krisztina-Judit sees him turn: skull-masked, black-suited, gaunt, the Grim Reaper attending a relative's funeral. He sets the telescope down on the balustrade. He stands alone, clutching a glass of wine in which he takes no interest.

The empty sockets of the face are directed straight towards her, an impression confirmed as the skull dips gently, acknowledging her gaze.

Krisztina-Judit shivers behind her spider's web.

She makes a wan attempt to work the party for her bosses, sidling between criminals and criminologists, philosophers and forgers, Vice-Chancellors and those whose interest in vice is other than academic. There is, she knows now, far more overlap between these groups than Dr K.-J. Németh would ever have imagined.

As a Son of Tepes, representative of perhaps the most powerful illicit organisation in the City, she is accorded certain dignities by all, but none pretend to like her.

Krisztina-Judit listens while the Chichimec-Acolhua Cllr Tenochtitlan discusses the need to reclaim the colonial term 'Aztec' for the Mesoamerican peoples. She witnesses the scattered and near-incomprehensible flirtation between two Macrocosmic Clans, the Trove and the Kalpa, whose jigsaw-masked members are dispersed throughout the party but who share a single, frankly carnal agenda. She is buttonholed by an androgyne City-born journalist, their mask a polychromatic runic star-map, who's always wanted to know exactly what a vampire was and did, and receives the information with cool bafflement.

As she moves from group to group, always at the periphery, always alone, he haunts the margins of her vision as a kind of commentary. At one point she loses sight of him, and asks one of the armoured security men if he knows who he is, but the bone-plated ogre just shrugs.

She withstands a froth-flecked diatribe from one of the Remote calling himself 'the Prof', who believes that the pre-City universe was a consensual hallucination experienced by the so-called resurrectees at the instant of their creation, and that all time-travellers through the alleged 'Uptime Gate' are party to a monstrous conspiracy. She quietly ducks out of discussing a new production of Sophocles' Kennedy at Dallas. She rebuffs the lecherous advances of a drunken leprechaun.

She finds herself facing him at last, spider to skull, as the party begins to vortex in towards some new arrival.

'Krisztina-Judit,' the black-suited skeleton whispers. His voice is hoarse. Were she not aware that such a thing was categorically impossible, she might imagine that it pains him to speak.

'What are you doing here?' she asks, certain she should recognise him. 'Who are you?'

She thought at first he might be with the Parliament, but this mask is bleak, unceremonious: a simple death's-head, with none of the playfulness or spectacle the Faction's rump bring to their carnival-skulls.

She sees his eyes flicker behind their sockets. 'We once… collaborated together,' he croaks. 'At a conference. The First Colonial University on Murigen.'

Krisztina-Judit reels. She hasn't thought about Murigen in decades. In her memory it is a vivid red curtain separating her living, warm life – Kayjay's life – from this interminable afterworld of hunger. She was a vampire for scant hours before her demise, surrounded by intoxicating scents and tastes of living flesh, of soft and vulnerable walking blood-sacs whom it was her bounden duty to pierce and shred and drink.

Such memories cannot be allowed the freedom of her mind, not now. Not here.

She realises that she is salivating. Loosening her mask, ashamed, she wipes her mouth.

'Father Finlay,' she says finally, remembering the paper he delivered at the conference on Murigen. It was less a lecture than a holy harangue against vampirekind – among whom at that time, despite her long-standing scientific interest in the subject, she neither numbered herself nor ever hoped to.

She remembers their later, more personal meeting after her becoming: running in his pack, tearing at human flesh together. Krisztina-Judit's resurrection body is incapable of changing shape, becoming wolf or bat or spider. She is a predator trapped in the body of an omnivore.

She also remembers dying agonisingly, blistering in the sapphire sun, watching through eyes turned black as cinders as this man – this treacherous priest – betrayed them all. It is her final memory before her resurrection.

Lightly, she says 'So how have you been keeping?'

The party continues to eddy around them, twirling in knots. She cannot tell from his scent whether Finlay, too, remains a vampire, which is suspicious in itself. Although his dress is sober he sports no priestly regalia, no lapel cross or rosary. Krisztina-Judit's parents were Catholics, and she notices these things.

He hasn't lost his clerical self-righteousness, though. 'Why do you work for the Sons of Tepes?' he asks her, after the briefest of social niceties.

Unguarded behind her mask, Krisztina-Judit frowns. 'I don't work for the Sons,' she says. 'I am a Son. And it's not as if there are many options here for people like us. Why, what outfit are you with?'

'Less an outfit than a habit,' he croaks.

He is still part of the Church, then, even if defrocked. She wonders whether he is here with Mother Cellini. From what she remembers, Ferox XXIV would be just his kind of Pope. That said…

'Was that a joke, Antonio?' she wonders. 'You've changed.'

Most people have, of course, during three hundred years of afterlife. Krisztina-Judit is surprised nonetheless. She feels as if she has been fossilised since her resurrection, ossified along with all the others of her obsolete, extinct species. Just as the name of Christ is fossilised within her name – impotent, trapped.

'You also, Kayjay,' Finlay says.

He has never called her this before, either. When they were alive they scarcely knew each other, and he was in any case a man given to formality. He would have called her 'Dr Németh'. In the hours between her becoming and her death, she had signalled what seemed then her glorious rebirth by using her full name, Krisztina-Judit.

Pretentiousness is, she now knows, pandemic among newborn vampires.

'Let me rephrase my question,' Finlay whispers. 'Why do you act as a mere footsoldier to these gangsters? You and I both know that your bloodline is far older than that of Earth's Mal'akh. Their most venerable generals, their vampires of ten thousand years, are infants compared with your progenitor.'

'Why are you here, Antonio?' she asks. 'Did you come to find me?'

In fact Krisztina-Judit has told nobody the details of her vampiric ancestry. She has no desire to lead, to become an object of reverence, nor to stand out from the crowd in any way. It is better to endure her current unlife of quiet and ravenous desperation.

Finlay continues, gasping still: 'There are few enough of that bloodline here. I've been researching the matter. I've eliminated every other human who became a vampire during the Murigen Infraction. Present company excepted, on Resurrection Day our imagos all reverted to a fully human state. Given your field of expertise, you might even be able to explain why.'

Not having studied cryptoepidemiology for centuries, Krisztina-Judit has no idea. Like most medical disciplines, it is supremely useless in the City. This pocket universe has never needed a doctor.

Silent for a moment, Krisztina-Judit stares across the View Point pavement towards the balustrade. To launch herself from there, on wings her body made in imitation of a bat or vulture, to soar above the City like a starship…

But Finlay says: 'There are changes coming to the City which will affect us all. There seems to be remarkable consensus on the matter, from precognitives to futurologists. Our history has reached a point of crisis, and the time is ripe for a tyrant. It's not clear who it will be yet – but cometh the hour, cometh the man.'

'You're working for the Church, still,' Krisztina-Judit concludes. 'But not for that crusading bastard Ferox. Not Teilhard's Human Catholics either. My G– My Vlad, you're still with her, aren't you?'

'"Her Holiness", to give her the full title,' he replies. 'Pope Beatrix II. Her original papacy wasn't long after our time, in the historical scheme of things.'

'And she's sent you out to chase some kind of Antichrist?' She feels obscurely disappointed. 'I thought you were both more rational than that.'

'Prophecy is just one element of the prediction,' Finlay croaks painstakingly. 'Her Holiness commissioned an extrapolative study of historical trends from one of our communicants. This person operates at an intellectual level which neither you nor I are competent to query.'

Krisztina-Judit wonders who he means. A Lasthuman? A Houseworld hybrid? One of the posthuman Hives? (She wonders about the logistics of baptising a Hive.) Converting any of these to Catholicism would have been a public relations coup of immense proportions. That Beatrix has kept it secret suggests a long-standing covert agenda.

'The tyrant will rise to power at a time of fear and panic,' Finlay continues, 'when the Citizens become vulnerable once more, as we were during the Timebeast Assault. He will act swiftly against his enemies, branding them as traitors to consolidate his power. He will attempt to divide all opposition. A ruler may better exert power over a fragmented populace, and when that populace is numbered in the undecillions its fragmentation can be almost total.'

'You're saying this,' she says, keeping her voice neutral, 'as a member of one of several thousand officially recognised Catholic churches.'

He nods. 'Of course. A significant minority of the Conclave of All Popes will act together to resist a future tyrant, but this will not be sufficient. Her Holiness believes that it's necessary to establish a pre-emptive coalition to oppose this as yet undeclared regime. One which goes far beyond the boundaries of the Catholic church, or indeed the Christian faith.'

She frowns. 'Why are you telling me this? You surely don't think…'

'You are a highly gifted woman, Kayjay,' Finlay whispers. 'I'm sure this will become apparent soon enough. Now if you'll excuse me, there are others here I need to speak to.' He nods at her once shortly and walks away, leaving her staring.

The guests are once again gravitating towards the welcome arch. She sees Finlay approach a peacock-masked man who looks to be a Yezidic cleric, arriving in time to help him fend off the amorous leprechaun. The cadaverous figure lifts the pixie effortlessly and hands him struggling to a puzzled security man.

Krisztina-Judit once again surveys her fellow guests, as they congregate across the View Point pavement.

By now she is well used to gauging those she sees on the basis of the meal they would, in theory, make: she no longer finds this even remotely disturbing. She is surprised, though, to realise that at present, despite not having eaten for two hundred and ninety years, she does not feel particularly hungry.

She realises that Finlay never resolved the question of whether he, too, was reborn a vampire. His words were deliberately ambiguous. If he is, though, she wonders how he deals with the hunger.

The Sons of Tepes organise whores and smuggle drugs. They steal, fence, embezzle and defraud. They even, on occasion, arrange 'accidents' for those of their opponents foolish enough to travel beyond the Uptime Gate – though in the nature of things this can only ever be a warning, rather than a removal.

They speak grandiloquently of how their noble condition brings them freedom from bourgeois human morality, how they are the true supermen, beyond good and evil.

In their still, unbeating hearts, however, every one of them is an incurable addict, cut off from any possibility of supply – and the Sons of Tepes is history's most self-deceiving addiction support group.

They could be so much more, she realises, if she were to change herself, and change them with her.

And Finlay? If he is, indeed, a vampire, perhaps he sees the hunger as his penance for what he calls his 'collaboration'. For him, the City must be never-ending Purgatory, without the slightest likelihood of reprieve.

Krisztina-Judit hears a clamour of amusement and surprise rippling out from the welcoming arch, and wonders who has turned up now.

Kit Marlowe? John and Yoko? Cleopatra? With this amount of fuss, it might even be Obama.

It feels supremely irrelevant to her. She glimpses burnished metal through the crowd.

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